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The Chinese Indigenous Church Movement

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THE CHINESE INDIGENOUS CHURCH MOVEMENT

Some of its Problems

(Reprinted from *World Dominion*)

BY

VIOLET M. GRUBB

WORLD DOMINION PRESS

1, TUDOR STREET
LONDON, E.C. 4

113, FULTON STREET
NEW YORK CITY, N.Y.

Price 25 Cents

PRINTED IN ENGLAND

D DOMINION MOVEMENT
156 FIFTH AVENUE
NEW YORK, N. Y.

NOV 20 1964

WORLD DOMINION PRESS

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Indigenous Church Series

THE Indigenous Church Series deals with the principles which should govern all efforts to plant the Christian Church in the various countries of the world.

THOMAS COCHRANE, *Editor.*

The Chinese Indigenous Church Movement

Some of its Problems

VIOLET M. GRUBB

THE subject of the Indigenous Church is a perennial one among those interested in Christianity in China at the present day; and, together with that of extra-territoriality and "unequal" treaties, it is heard echoing through every serious conversation. But in spite of the efforts at devolution and the changes in organization, it is far from clear that the conception of a Chinese Christian Church has as yet penetrated the national consciousness. "Speaking frankly," says Dr. C. Y. Cheng, the present secretary of the National Christian Council, "we Chinese Christians are not satisfied with the situation in the Church as it is to-day. . . . What is needed to-day is not so much a statement or re-statement of the ideal just mentioned, but rather a realizing of that ideal. For years, Christian missionaries have been committed to the position that it is right that the Christian Church should become naturalized in every country in which it is found. The difficulty is that, while there has been agreement in theory, too little has been done to put it into operation. . . . We do not want to build a church that is foreign, but we must admit that there is little or no sign that the Christian Church in China is becoming Chinese."

Such a statement would be contested by many, more especially by foreign missionaries, who have given much thought to the problem. But even comprehensive changes, brought to an apparently successful conclusion, do not convert a Church that yesterday was called "foreign," into one that to-day is labelled "indigenous." It is recognized that something deeper is needed, and there is in every direction a search to ascertain what constitutes the true "indigeneity" of a Church. The present moment is a particularly favourable one for the consideration of this question in China. The large majority

of missionaries are withdrawn from their stations, and are either congregated in coastal cities, or are taking a furlough at home. The Chinese, perhaps for the first time since Christianity came into their lives, are left to face for themselves the implications of their membership in the body, the Church. Missionaries will have to consider seriously whether, when the opportunity comes, they should return to their work, take it up at the place they laid it down, and continue along the old lines, or on the other hand, if they are sincere in endeavouring to plant a Church "which is capable of maintaining and propagating itself on native soil," whether there is not need for a new outlook and for new methods.

To gain a clear idea of the setting of the Church in China, we must consider first three existing conditions which have much to do with the pressure of the indigenous problem.

(*a*) The first and most evident is a great change which has come over the student class in the last few years along with the growth of Nationalism. The student body is now composed of young men and women, who, with little or no experience, have it in their power to mould the political thought of China. Their qualifications are a passionate love for their country, a real if often misguided determination to serve her to the utmost of their capacity, and that driving force which comes from subordinating everything to one great idea—freedom and equality—the freedom which is to cover all aspects of life—education, marriage, writings, speech and also religion ; and equality, which is to level all distinctions of wealth and aristocracy.

In the present economic condition of China, it is little wonder that these doctrines, preached in and out of season, spread in every direction, among ignorant farmers and coolies, among friends and relatives in the large country houses, and not least, among those who are banded together to form a Church. "In time of war"—says Dean Inge (and, we may add, of revolution)—"effective partisan cries have to be devised, which will appeal to and be understood by the masses. . . . All finer issues

are coarsened, all scruples, intellectual or moral, have to be laid aside; war is a barbarous business and must be conducted with the weapons of barbarism."

So it comes about that these two great ideas are resolved into popular slogans and the desire for freedom is expressed in the struggle to get rid of the so-called oppression of foreign nations, represented by the business man and the missionary, while the spirit of equality resents bitterly all superiority, whether of wealth, nationality or position. From our present point of view, it is very serious that this search for freedom involves hostility to the activities of the Christian Church on the ground that it is unmistakably "that foreign sect." This explains why, in the recent political troubles, the Christian Church has suffered greatly, the persecution starting with the Mission schools; even independent schools which give Christian teaching have come under the same condemnation. Quite logically, persecution of Christians has followed, on the ground that they are "foreign slaves," some having even been stoned to death on this false accusation. A young Shanghai doctor, an ardent member of the Nationalist Party, said to me: "Although I am a member of the Chinese Independent Church here, the worst thing I have to face among my relatives or patients is the fact that as soon as I mention my religion I am branded as "foreignized." It may truly be said that the recent religious persecution has not been due to any objection to the doctrines of Jesus Christ, *per se*, but that it has come from the students, in answer to the apparently obvious charge: "Christianity is another of the foreign importations which may suit the West but are only harmful in the East."

(*b*) But there is another and more vital obstacle to the growth of Christianity in China. Undoubtedly, the Church as at present constituted is failing to gather in those who ought both to be giving and gaining inspiration from the fellowship of Christ's Body. Numbers are admittedly misleading, and from statistics this point cannot be proved, but none of those who work among students, scholars and

the *literati,* would deny that they have met with numerous instances of men and women who know of the doctrine, who seek to study it further, who call themselves followers of Christ, but who only feel estranged, confused and remote from the spirit they have come to love, when they attend a Christian service.

There will always be malcontents who, for some slight reason or another, will join no body, but for the most part these people are not malcontents. When one is told again and again—in response to the suggestion that fellowship and further light will be the outcome of membership in some Christian group—" I have been to several services, but their customs are strange, their sermons are full of religious terms we Chinese do not use, their service books are difficult to understand, and I know no one there," it makes one consider seriously the need for either drastic changes, or a fresh start in the Church. In the words of Dr. Cheng : " In reality its (the Church's) influence on the Chinese people is very small . . . it is difficult to get thinking men, even when they admire the teaching of Jesus, to be willing to unite with the Church, because of its thoroughly foreign character."

The denominational difficulty is one of the reasons for this failure. One hundred and forty denominations are at work in China; even such a city as Changsha, which has only been open to Missions during the last twenty-six years, is a fruitful field for thirteen distinct branches of the Christian Church. The Chinese are not a controversial race but a practical one ; they see no reason and no sense in these " many and great divisions," based to a large extent upon foreign historical disputes ; they find no sanction for them in the life and teaching of Christ, and many people take the line that, in order to avoid becoming involved in difficult doctrinal questions which are no concern of theirs, they prefer to continue the study of the " Jesus teaching " in the quiet of their own homes. Is it not a significant sign of the times that a missionary, visiting Hangchow recently, was received with great kindness by the individual Christians, but when she

announced that the other missionaries intended to return and re-open their work, she was told quite frankly that all the Christians in the city had met together, that they had decided that they would have no more divisions, that they would form one central Church, and that they would manage this entirely by themselves?

(*c*) Even when we think of the Churches which have been given solely into the control of the Chinese, we cannot fold our hands and congratulate ourselves that "indigeneity" has been attained. The pastors are, as a rule, drawn from the middle schools, and too often they are men of little education and culture in things Chinese. To their secondary education they add a training in Christian doctrine and method at a theological college managed by missionaries of some particular denomination. Here they may gain a knowledge of English, a certain religious vocabulary, composed of foreign words somewhat crudely translated into Chinese, and too often a complete set of Western ideas concerning Church ceremony, ritual and discipline, a half-comprehended knowledge of Church history, and in most cases a real desire to preach the truth, as they know it, to their flock. They return to their cities and villages and gather round them a congregation, but how many of that little group—or indeed of any Christian group in China—are drawn from what corresponds to the educated class in England? On the membership roll of the Church it is difficult to find the names of teachers and scholars, of politicians and officers, together with those of their wives and daughters, all of them men and women possessing wide-spread influence and power.

It is not sufficient for the Church to say: "A rich man shall hardly enter into the Kingdom" so long as the cause lies partly in those we have trained and partly in ourselves. For too often the pastors can make no appeal to the educated classes; their language is an offence to those who regard formal speech as poetry; their ideas are narrow, with the slightest background of Chinese history and philosophy, and, though they may reach the poor,

they have no point of contact with the rich. We ourselves are not any the more exempt from this criticism. It is said that when the Indian monks, who brought Buddhism to China, returned again to their own country, they left behind two prevailing impressions: first, the high level of spirituality required from those who professed this religion, and second, the wonderful industry and patience with which they mastered the Chinese language, studied its literary writings and translated the Buddhist scriptures into classical Chinese, thus spreading the doctrine among the intelligentsia. Could the latter remark be made of any but a few missionaries of the present day, and is it possible to reach the educated Chinese without striving towards this aim? However much China may talk of democracy, she has and will continue to have for some time an undoubted aristocracy of intellect, and there is urgent reason to consider how the Church can bring the great truths that are in Christ before the students, scholars and rulers, in such a way that they will take deep root and bring forth fresh life.

Bearing in mind, then, that the growth of the Church in China is being hindered by these three causes, its foreign aspect, its outward form of expression and its lack of appeal to the educated, I would like to describe an unconscious attempt to overcome some of these obstacles.

There is a small independent church, founded in 1914, in the slums of Changsha, Hunan. Its origin was curious. The early pioneer missionaries found themselves facing certain difficulties and they drew up certain rules. Perhaps the biggest problem was that of the family system, which is the basis of all Chinese life, and in most Churches it was decided that ancestral tablets must be burned and secondary wives put away. A Chinese gentleman, to whom had come a vision of the love of God and a knowledge of His power, could not agree that the foreigners had acted rightly in these respects, and, since he would not accept the ruling of the Church and thus become a member, he decided to open an independent preaching hall in the slums of his native city for the teaching of the doctrines of

Christ. With his own money he built a compound at the end of a poverty-stricken street, with rooms for himself and his family, a hall for meetings, and space for a little school; leaving his comfortable home, he spent the rest of his life there, bequeathing the work to his son. The latter, also a Christian, was an expert engineer, trained in America, and capable of earning a large salary. Following in his father's footsteps, he went with his family to live in this slum. Here he taught all and sundry on Sunday, gathered the children into a free school and also tried to train the elder ones in various trades, like basket work.

From our point of view, this attempt may not be efficient. It has suffered greatly from the lack of a woman worker to visit among the homes and get to know the parents; it has suffered from shortage of funds, since the members of the congregation are so poor that they can give nothing, and the leader of the Church has had to teach in the city schools in order to earn money for the enterprise; it has suffered even more, on the leader's own admission, from the fact that, owing to his upbringing and Western education, he is on a level far above the beggars, opium smokers and rickshaw coolies among whom he lives, and he is often unable to meet them on common ground. What, then, has it gained? Would it not have been better linked up to some Mission? It would then have had the supervision of some foreigner who, out of his experience and training, could have suggested new methods of work; it would have received grants of money for equipment. But in the fact that it had no foreign connections lay its strength, and its very independence forms an answer to the first of the obstacles now facing the Church in China. From the beginning, Christians should have rejoiced in its inception, for could they not see here a man who, however deeply they might disagree with his ideas with regard to Chinese customs, was undoubtedly earnestly seeking to work out the principles of Christ, and had the courage and enterprise to give up his time and money to this end. Was not the Church here becoming self-propagating and therefore indigenous in one man's soul?

The effect of this effort on this wide-spread family has been great. They saw a member of their clan, whom they honoured and respected, for the love of Jesus renouncing even his social position, to work and—far more—to live, among the lowest of the low, and later, they saw his son following his example. Yet, these two men were in no sense cut off from their family, for they still held many of the ancient customs in common; and the family were not cut off from the Church, for some can be seen worshipping in the preaching hall as Christians, and others are not far from the Kingdom. In this experiment do we not see the Church becoming indigenous in one family? And is it not doubtful whether this would have occurred, had the father joined a Church, adopted foreign ceremonies, cast off many familiar customs and thus been alienated from his very conservative relatives? Further, although the humble congregation know nothing of these arguments, yet even they are aware that it is *their* Church. Last Christmas, in Changsha, very few Christians had the courage to hold services, for the students had vowed to break up any religious meeting in the city. But among the few was this little independent Church, which planned a service and entertainment. In the middle of the evening some students from outside arrived, perhaps intending to do harm, but before anything could occur, a big boy in the congregation stood up and said to them: "This is the Chinese Jesus teaching and no foreign Mission; you cannot harm a Chinese Church"; and the invaders faded away.

I do not wish to give the impression that there is not much that can be criticized in this struggling enterprise, but we must also acknowledge that in such ways, without the aid of our money or the supervision of a foreign missionary, here and there, a living and growing Church is being built in China by men devoted to the Cause.

The second attempt represents one of the most interesting pieces of work that I have been privileged to see, and it is quoted in illustration of the statement that the Church is hindered in its growth by its cut-and-dried methods and lack of adaptability to native customs.

More than twenty years ago, Dr. (then Mr.) Karl Reichelt, of the Swedish Lutheran Mission, was staying in a Buddhist monastery in South Hunan ; while talking with the monks, he became impressed with his inability to convey his message to them. He then conceived the idea of giving his life to work among monks, and he devoted fifteen years to a preparation for this, travelling in different parts of China, visiting the monasteries, coming into contact with the monks and abbots and endeavouring to find both the terms and the content that would make his message acceptable. Five years ago he opened a Christian home for Buddhist monks in Nanking, as far as possible based on lines familiar to these men.

The monks travel widely over China from one sacred spot to another ; Dr. Reichelt, therefore, arranged that they might stay with him free of charge, and for as long a time as they liked, as they would do at any monastery. When they reached his unpretentious compound, they found nothing very remote from their accustomed surroundings—a room where they might spread out their bedding, a hall of meditation, guest rooms for conversation and a preaching hall. Dr. Reichelt, wearing the simple robes of a monk, moved among them and spent his days discussing the great religious truths uppermost in the minds of both parties. Common ground could always be found in the discussion of the Logos or Word, referred to in Chinese as the " Tao," the Spirit behind all things, and the most familiar term in the mind of the Buddhist ; from this it was easy to pass to the first chapter of St. John, and to expound its central truths to men whose hearing had already been won, showing how the " Tao " has found its ultimate and highest revelation in the person of Jesus Christ. There were few who did not find intense interest in these lengthy conversations, while they recognized Dr. Reichelt as a " Tao yu " or " friend in the doctrine " ; some of them said openly that this was the revelation that they had been seeking for years ; others, that they and Dr. Reichelt had a special affinity.

But the matter did not cease in mere interest. More

than a thousand monks passed through the doors of that house ; each monk stayed there for a period varying from two or three days to several months ; each one met with the truth as seen in Jesus Christ, laid before him personally. Before he left, he received a copy of the New Testament to study by the way, which he could also introduce as a new treasure to his brother monks all over the country. On Sunday, services were held of the simplest description, so that all could understand and feel themselves in a familiar atmosphere. Chanting of prayers and responses had a considerable place in the worship, and the exposition that followed was framed in such a way that both the terms used and the line of argument presented no difficulty to the hearers.

Although Dr. Reichelt is widely known in Buddhist circles, and is always welcomed at their conferences, it is no part of his aim to spend his time in travelling or even in trying to reach a wider circle. Both his former preparation and his present work are designed to gather men round him who will devote their lives to passing on the knowledge of the love of Christ to their brethren. He aims at giving them some teaching, some introduction to the great truths that can be had for the seeking in the Word ; then he encourages them to go on and work out their beliefs, as they are guided by the Spirit. Two such men have gone from him back to their own people, while others are living with him and preparing for this work. While he lays no vows upon them, nor seeks to bind them in any way, yet it is his prayer that some may feel called to a life of complete renunciation, and may devote themselves wholly to carrying the Gospel into the monasteries, where they alone would have free entrance.

Such work cannot be judged by numbers—it will never be known how far the ripples starting from that little centre in Nanking are spreading over China, but the fact remains that this man, by frankly discarding all that seems to him unprofitable in his Western heritage, by his fearless adoption of all that may in the slightest degree contribute to the furtherance of his message, and by his absolute

and unshaken devotion to the men among whom he works, has succeeded in bridging over the gulfs of nationality and creed and in bringing the Good News to his friends, as one much loved brother brings good tidings to another from the Father of them both.

With these examples in mind, I would attempt to draw some deductions as to the lines on which the future Chinese Christian Church will be built, if it is to be spontaneously "growing and expanding on the soil without any external aid," and from that I would go on to consider the place of the foreign missionary in its development.

(*a*) *Leadership.*—The Chinese Christians are capable of leadership. We need not feel that no one will spring up to take our place—rather our difficulty will be to get out of the way of the leaders. If the early Churches, guided by the Spirit, were capable of organizing their own affairs, what right have we to conclude that the power of the same Spirit has decreased in these days and in this country? The results may be far from what we expect, and may even be contrary to much that we have built, but if we suspect that the withdrawal of our leadership would mean the collapse of the Christian Church in China, might we not then justifiably doubt the value of one hundred years of Christian work in China? In any form of work, it is an axiom that when a man feels himself indispensable, it is time for him to resign.

(*b*) *Organization.*—Observation of the present conditions in China seems to indicate that the organization of the Christian Church on Chinese lines will mean fewer rules and regulations. The Chinese are a tolerant race. I have attended a most solemn Confucian service at the spring solstice, in memory of the spirits of departed ancestors, where the members of the clan were gathered together to offer sacrifices of a pig and a goat, to pour out wine as a libation, to burn blood and prayers and silk in homage to the spirits. And yet, so tolerant are these people, that it did not occur to the most conservative and elderly scholar present to object, when the four

Christian members of the family asked permission to read the Bible and to pray.

(*c*) *Finance.*—If a doctrine is to be indigenous in a body of people, it is essential that their activities shall be financially self-supporting. If the money comes from foreign sources, then it is but natural that those who gave the money will wish to have, either personally or through their agents, some say in the expenditure. More than that, it can only weaken the character of the young Christians to know that, without any effort on their part, money will flow in. Do we find St. Paul providing funds for the infant Churches of Asia? Were they not, rather, encouraged to make contributions to the brethren in Judea "every man according to his ability"? The argument is often used that the Christian Church is only a small growing body, and that it cannot be expected to keep in repair the beautiful Churches with their surrounding buildings, the up-to-date Church schools or Bible colleges with their modern furniture, central heating, electric devices and other Western apparatus. This argument is undoubtedly true; but should it not be answered by a further question—in our generous and unwise enthusiasm have we not pressed upon a primitive Church, similar to that of the first century, the methods and equipment which are the result of twenty centuries of Christian development in the West? In other words, we have given to the Chinese Church, buildings, schools and elaborate equipment, which in her present state of development she is unable to use aright. Undoubtedly these institutions that are imposed from the West must be supported from the West; it would seem, however, that the Indigenous Church might not choose to meet in formal buildings, but might gather, as did the early Christians, in the rooms of believers. The Chinese are, in many ways, singularly impervious to atmosphere. It is to them natural to eat, work and pray in one room, and the body of Christians may see no necessity at present to provide money for the support of Church buildings. Equally, if left to themselves, they may not wish or be able to keep up elaborate schools with fine libraries and equipment. If we

are handing over our buildings to the Chinese, we must also hand over the responsibility for the finances, and what if the Church cannot or will not accept it? While seriously accepting the principle that for the full growth of the Christian Church it is essential that it should be self-supporting, are we going to draw back from what is a spiritual issue, for the sake of our bricks and mortar?

(*d*) *The Spiritual Life of the Indigenous Church.*—We wait to see what contribution the Chinese Christian Church will make towards revealing the fullness of Christ. Our heritage as sons of God cannot fail to be the richer when the distinctive elements in Chinese culture and personality reach their highest development in Him. We cannot doubt that a nation which has made such contributions in the realms of truth and beauty, will also, under the stimulating influence of the Holy Spirit, incalculably enrich our Christian conception of ethical ideas and abstract values. Nor, since the Chinese are a practical race, and within the family, generous and obedient, will they fail to set for our example new and higher ideals of service.

The Place of the Foreign Missionary.—The question at once arises: if these are the obstacles we seek to remove and the type of Christian body we are aiming at, what then is the place of the missionary, or indeed has he any place? To the latter query the answer is clear from all the best of China's Christians—and after all they are the people to be consulted—for the right type of missionary there will always be a place, alongside of his Chinese friends. In the words of the National Christian Council: "Missionaries of the highest spiritual and intellectual qualities are more than ever wanted in China." But few are too blind to see that a new era has dawned, and that the missionaries of the future will need to have a rather different outlook, and to lead a somewhat different life than in the past, if they are to be freely welcomed by the Chinese.

Dr. Reichelt has pointed out clearly that it was only when the Indian monks renounced their position as leaders

in the monasteries and elsewhere, that Buddhism really took root and spread in China, becoming at one time the greatest uniting force in the land. Should we not learn from this that if we sincerely wish the Christian Church to do likewise, it is time we benefited by their example? Our task will not be rendered easier when we are no longer leaders, for the nature of our service will be to give our best under Chinese control, and our sacrifice will be to stand by and see things done in ways we cannot approve, even to watch them being handled inefficiently from the Western point of view.

What then is to be the actual work of the Christian missionary? In the view of the writer, we must go back to St. Paul* and examine the methods of that great missionary genius in missionary work. We do not find that he regarded it as his business to settle in a city and organize all the details of the Church life of the new Christians. No—he was always travelling from place to place, as he was wanted—helping, counselling, advising those who, of their own accord, were struggling with their Church problems; even in those centres where he lived for as long as two years, do we read that he dealt with mountains of business, parochial accounts, organizing of schools, baptisms, confirmations? Did he not surely leave these to the local Christians, and spend his time in preaching and discussing, only giving his opinions on administrative points when directly asked? "I thank God"—he says—"that I baptized none of you but . . for Christ sent me not to baptize but to preach the Gospel." So, in bringing to China the Light that lightens all the world, is it not our business to show the beams of that Light far and wide, leaving those who are lightened by its rays to build up, in groups of two or three, their own organization?

Ultimately, of course, all will depend on the personality of the missionary, his "passion for friendship," and his spiritual resources. Talents, brains, degrees, gifts of

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* "Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours," by Roland Allen. World Dominion Press, 3/6 (post paid 3/9).

oratory—none of these are to be despised, but they pass for little in the Chinese mind, compared with character. The Chinese possess these gifts in abundance, but in the sphere of character they are suffering from moral bankruptcy and they know it. The appeal of the teaching of Jesus is that He promises new life and that in unlimited supply. It is to the missionary that they look to lead them into the secret of this treasure without price, and that, and that alone, is his contribution to the Indigenous Church. No greater and no more exacting privilege could fall to the lot of any man. It could hardly be put more clearly than in the words of a student: "We need you to help us to solve the problem of living up to the principles of Jesus, in the spirit of Jesus."

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